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Africa - Labor Problems

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Back to Slavery?

BY

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Two vital issues, not only to Native Races, but to the British Public, are raised by this pamphlet:—

- (a) *The fundamental moral question as to whether the white race is entitled to declare a "property right" in the person of the African, and*
- (b) *A question of fact,—namely, whether or not it is true that the African race is incapable of responding to the ordinary inducements of industry, and must therefore be taught to earn wages by a system of administrative compulsion.*

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BACK TO SLAVERY?

IN 1712, with the Royal authority of Queen Anne, Britain officially embarked upon the negro slave traffic, the monopoly of which she had secured to herself by the Treaty of Utrecht. Hardly a voice was raised against this infamy, and apparently none saw whither it would lead. The slave traffic grew to immense proportions, was then fought, and ultimately abolished; since that day it has frequently shown signs of revival in different forms and guises: peonage, Congo exploitation, contract labour, forced labour. A new form, more insidious and far more dangerous, now threatens to graft itself upon British Colonial development; true, its menace to-day is no bigger than a man's hand, and only one colony is infected, but its ominous shadow is there, for all who care to devote themselves to ten minutes' clear thinking upon the danger into which British Colonial statecraft has drifted.

The mischief lies in the fact that the new system of forced labour in Kenya Colony marks as definite a departure in British Colonial policy as the Treaty of Utrecht did when it committed the British nation to an official monopoly of the traffic in negroes. Sir Edward Northey's system quite formally breaks away from the Victorian idea of trusteeship, and switches us back to the policy of two centuries ago, when the negro was officially and unofficially regarded as the legitimate plunder of the strong. The battle against this system in East Africa has been a long one, and, however unpleasant it may be, the fact should be courageously faced that the forces of morality have been beaten, for a time, in the struggle against this new declaration of a property right in the negro.

The stages which have led up to this situation are already fairly familiar. The first was the postulated attitude of the East African settler—namely, that, as an immigrant, the white man was entitled to the first claim upon the labour of the indigenous African. After some considerable agitation a Commission was appointed to consider the question of the labour supply for white settlers. The evidence tendered to this Commission by the settlers was almost entirely in support of the plea that by some means or other the native must be made to fulfil his appointed place by "working for wages" for the white man. In 1913, the most favoured method was

that of taking away the land from the native. Lord Delamere, for example, said:—

“ If the policy was to be continued that every native was to be a landholder of a sufficient area on which to establish himself, then the question of obtaining a satisfactory labour supply would never be settled.”

Lord Delamere was quite correct; an industrious native population, developing their own small holdings, would never dream of leaving them in order to “ work for wages ” for white men—which meant an insignificant cash return and, too often, a generous application of cuffs and blows. The African everywhere has shown that, given a secure tenure of his land, he can, under a sympathetic administration, develop it for the benefit of all, but this is exactly what the settlers of East Africa do not want! They demand that an end be put to this nonsense about trusteeship and the education of the native in the arts and sciences of agriculture. Mr. T. Howitt, of Kyambu, voiced this opinion when he said that he

“ did not favour the idea of natives being taught better methods of agriculture in the Reserves, on the grounds that, if they were taught to work in the Reserves, the tendency would be for them not to come out at all. In the event of the size of the Reserves being reduced, then the effect might be different.”

The first stage in the effort to re-establish this property right in the African closed with the issue of the 1913 Report, and although the Commissioners did not endorse the policy of taking the land from the natives in order to force them to “ work for wages,” it was made clear that, if beaten on this, the settlers would propose some other method.

With the close of the war, pressure from the settlers again increased, very largely as the result of organised “ soldier settler ” schemes, but with the unprecedented expropriation of the natives of Southern Rhodesia before the public, it was clearly impossible to attempt a similar experiment on so colossal a scale in British East Africa, and another hare was started. This time a leaf was taken out of King Leopold’s book, and the East African native was held up to public odium as an essentially idle and degraded being, who for his own moral welfare must be taught the dignity of labour—by compulsion. It was urged that compulsory labour in the interests of the general community was a perfectly legitimate method of education, but the awkward admission was made that this public work was so unpopular that the native, rather than be subjected to it, would bow to the inevitable, and leave his village to “ work for wages.” To the delight of those who believed in the educational value of forced labour, a very neat amendment to an existing Ordinance was thought to have secured this happy development!

But alas! even in Africa the best-made schemes of mice and men quite unexpectedly go all to pieces. The Ordinances in Kenya provide for a levy of twenty-four days for local public works, and a conscription of sixty days for general public works—eighty-four days in all. Into these Ordinances there had been inserted an exemption clause, again with the object of forcing the native to “work for wages,” but, unfortunately for the real authors of the scheme, this clause, intended to be a shackle, became in fact the portal of liberty. The *exemption* reads as follows:—

“If he (the native) be fully employed in any other occupation, or has been so employed during the preceding 12 months for a period of 3 months.”

A commonsense interpretation of this clause gave liberty to every native to engage in his own agricultural and industrial enterprise, and those who know the habits of the African know very well that, with this exemption, very few Africans would be conscripted. But in order that the freedom of the African should be safeguarded beyond doubt or question, Mr. Oswald Mosley asked the Colonial Secretary:—*

“Whether, in claiming exemption from the forced-labour Ordinances of British East Africa, a native will be entitled to show that he has worked for three months during the preceding year on his own gardens or plantations, and to claim exemption on these grounds?”

To this Mr. Mosley received the satisfactory reply that:—

“If a native has been fully employed in cultivation for himself for three months during the preceding twelve months, he is exempt from the provisions of the Native Authority Amendment Ordinance, 1920.”

It seems that this reply cabled to East Africa caused consternation amongst the settlers, and also in certain official quarters, and the cry went up that the economic prosperity of the Colony was endangered because once again the plan for forcing the native to “work for wages” had collapsed. It was clear that something had to be done, and yet another Commission came into existence—this time appointed by the Convention of Associations, the most influential and vocal body of organised public opinion in the Colony. The Commission included the Chairman of the Convention, the Archdeacon of Kavirondo, a Vicar-General, the Chaplain at Nairobi, and a number of leading settlers.

The Report issued by this Committee will make interesting reading for future generations. The East African native depicted in this Report is a very unlovely creature, but it is amazing that a

* October 27th, 1920.

Commission composed of intelligent men should have placed on record the following interpretation of the Forced Labour Ordinance:—

*“Compulsory paid labour for Government Departments is provided for under the Native Authority Amendment Ordinance. By virtue of this law men who have not been employed for wages for a period of three months in the previous year can be compelled to work for a period of sixty days for wages for a public department.”**

The law, of course, says nothing of the kind, and any attempt to give such an interpretation is highly reprehensible in face of the advice tendered to the Secretary of State. What, in practice, would such a law mean? In the first place, no native would lay down plantations or economic gardens, if he had hanging over his head the threat of conscription, unless he had worked for a white man for three months, *for wages*; thus, such a law would bar all native industrial progress. Next, a law penalising every adult male who did not work for wages would throw upon the women so much of the heavy work of agriculture that food crops would be gravely reduced. Thirdly, in spite of Lord Milner's timely warning that the Government should “spare no pains to prevent abuses,” the whole thing is an abuse which will propagate its species in every part of Kenya; already a crop of rumours is pouring in, confirming once again the folly of trying to impose a form of slavery of so harmless a character that there should be “no abuses”—it cannot be done! Britain tried it in Matabeleland and had a rebellion; Leopold tried the sixty days' compulsory dodge in the Congo and quickly found himself involved in atrocities. Natural laws cannot be defied upon the assumption that when danger appears we can cry out “Thus far and no farther.” Finally, it must be borne in mind that, throughout history, any attempt to force slavery upon Africans in their own homes has always led first to disaffection and war, and then, when beaten and cowed, the wretched natives resort to what the European thinks is a curious habit—they make their final protest by dying in their thousands, and the source of labour supply dries up.

The new labour system in East Africa raises primarily a moral issue of exceptional magnitude, and secondly, a question of fact. The primary issue raised is whether the white race has any title at all to claim a property value in the person of the African, and the second issue, whether it is or is not a fact that the African is so inherently indolent as to be impervious to the ordinary inducements of industry, and that in fact he “knows no other law than force”? It is unthinkable that public opinion will tolerate, at this

* Italicised portion mine.—J. H. H.

stage of civilisation, any declaration which implies a property right in the person of the African; such a suggestion is morally untenable. The question of fact is happily capable of several tests. Is it, or is it not true, that the African is so inherently idle that he responds only to force? It may be true that he has periods of idleness—he is not alone in that!—it may be true, probably is so, that he labours intermittently. But what is equally true, is, that in spite of the fact that the African race is only now emerging from barbarism, is only now attempting to cross, in a decade, the bridge of centuries, the whole race is not only working, but is working hardest where the hand of a considerate administrator beckons onwards to a higher rate of progress; so much is this true that, taking all things into consideration, it is doubtful whether any race can show so favourable a record. The first test capable of application to the facts of the situation is the testimony of Administrators and Government Commissions. It is a striking fact that no charge of inherent indolence has ever been levelled against the African by responsible and experienced rulers, whilst several individual rulers and Government Commissions have testified to the industrious habits of the race. The most notable is to be found in the Report of Sir Godfrey Lagden's Commission, which, for something like four years, made investigations from the Cape to the Zambesi. In his Report Sir Godfrey Lagden said:—

“The theory that the South African natives are hopelessly indolent may be dismissed as being not in accordance with the facts. Even the simple wants of the native population cannot be supplied without some degree of exertion. The population of 4,652,662 has to derive its sustenance from a soil which is not everywhere fertile, and the native agriculturist has to contend with the same drawbacks of drought and pestilence that beset the European farmer. The labour of tilling the soil, weeding and reaping is shared, but is by no means exclusively performed by the native women; and the representation of the native living at his own village a lazy and luxurious life, supported by his wife or wives, is misleading.”*

In 1911 a Commission of Enquiry in Southern Rhodesia reported as follows upon the alleged indolence of the African:—

“It is frequently urged that native males lead an idle life at their kraals. This is not borne out by the evidence which we have received. On the contrary, they appear to do the bulk of the heavy work, and the woman is not the slave which she is so frequently alleged to be.”†

Another test—and this is probably conclusive—is the economic test.

* Report of the South African Native Affairs Commission, 1903-5, par. 573.

† Southern Rhodesia Report of the Native Affairs Committee of Enquiry, 1910-11.

In West Africa to-day, the native, in secure occupancy of his land, has made West African territories *the* market of the world for indigenous oil products, and the principal market of the world for cocoa. In 1845 Great Britain imported from West Africa less than 300 tons of oil products; to-day she is importing well over 200,000 tons, whilst it has been estimated that the total oil output from West Africa garnered entirely by the horny hand of the simple African, exceeds £12,000,000. But cocoa now runs a close race with oil products. Palm products are indigenous, cocoa was introduced about the year 1887 by a Fanti returning from overseas to a village called Mampong. This Fanti native, Tetty Quassie by name, laid down a tiny plantation in 1887-8 and reaped his first harvest in 1891, and obtained for his beans four golden sovereigns; the Gold Coast natives, emerging from a period of internecine war, with its subsequent famine and poverty, seized upon this as the way to economic progress, and with the aid of Government and the missionaries, had, by the year 1900, reached an output of 1,000 tons; in ten years these natives forced the pace to 30,000 tons, and ten years later—namely, in 1919, to 177,000 tons, worth £8,000,000. But this by no means exhausts the efforts of the 1,000,000 natives on the Gold Coast, for besides their splendid output of cocoa and oil, they had, during fifteen years, mined and exported nearly £20,000,000 of gold. In Nigeria, further South, the Egbas and Yorubas, whilst maintaining a palm oil and kernel output at about £8,000,000, are producing cotton in ever-increasing quantities and, as Sir Hugh Clifford points out, they have done all this whilst actually increasing their cocoa export by five times. Between the years 1914 and 1919, their export of cocoa reached over 25,000 tons, and promises to compete in output with that of the Gold Coast before many years have passed. Its export value already exceeds £1,000,000. The trade figures really tell a wonderful story. In 1900, Nigerian trade volume was about $2\frac{1}{4}$ millions sterling; to-day it is 25 millions—an increase of over 11 times. In the Gold Coast the increase during the same period was from just over 2 millions to nearly 9 millions. In Sierra Leone, it was from £900,000 to nearly 3 millions, and in Basutoland, where the natives own all the land, from £500,000 to nearly £2,000,000. The whole of this volume of trade, it should be remembered, is in the hands of the African native.

It is frequently argued by those who favour the East African "force" policy, that West African economic success is due to a difference in the "fibre" of the African in the respective Dependencies. The fallacy of this argument is easily demonstrated; "cheek by jowl" with Nigeria is the German Cameroons, in which, prior to 1914, was pursued the policy of White Exploita-

tion, with natives "working for wages"—under "legitimate compulsion," as they say in Nairobi—and with what result? This system, which was founded with a great flourish of administrative trumpets, with land given to vigorous Teutonic settlers, plantations highly organised with expert agriculturists, labour produced by "legitimate" compulsion, "without abuses" (at first!) was, after twenty-five years of effort, only capable of an output of £200,000 as compared with the output of approximately £3,000,000 by the Gold Coast (since, rising to £8,000,000). But the figures are everywhere really overwhelmingly in conflict with the "lazy nigger" theory. Little Basutoland, no less than West Africa, also makes a substantial contribution to the task of shattering the absurd fallacy of the indolent nigger. In 1900, the volume of trade in Basutoland, as we have seen, was only £500,000, but in 1920 it was nearly £2,000,000! Nor again was this the whole story, for a large proportion of Basutos journeyed to the gold mines to take their share in winning the precious yellow metal for European companies. As Sir Godfrey Lagden said in 1899 to Lord Milner (then Sir Alfred Milner):—

"These facts (on industry) are the best rejoinder to those who urge that Basutoland is a useless native reserve. To others, who urge higher education of the natives, it may be pointed out that to educate them *above* labour would be a huge mistake. Primarily the native labour industry supplies a dominion want, and, secondly, it tends to fertilize native territories with cash which is at once diffused in exchange for English goods."*

The gold mines again add their quota in giving the lie to those who propagate the "indolent native" theory; not only so, but the figures show that, man for man, the native actually compares very favourably with the white worker in this respect. Since "Joburg" commenced winning gold from its twenty-eight miles of reef, we have obtained £700,000,000 by the aid of approximately 200,000 natives and 15,000 white men; within recent years the miners and mineowners have seen coming ever nearer the day when the low-level mines will cease to figure as "paying propositions." In 1920 the Government also became anxious, and Earl Buxton appointed a Commission to investigate the situation, when it was shown that the chief reasons for fearing financial difficulties were (a) increased *cost* of production, and (b) lower *volume* production, but the lower rate of production *was greater in the case of the white employees than in that of the natives!*

(Tons produced underground. Decrease: White Men, 14 per cent.; Natives, 12 per cent.)

On the simple question of fact, every figure and every argument

* Cd. 3-11, 1898-9.

is ranged against a Colonial system based upon the theory of a property right in native labour, and is solidly on the side of native industry and development. From the economic standpoint, commerce benefits most from the *volume* of trade, and, as has been shown, a native community, suitably educated, instructed, and firmly established on the soil, will, in tropical and sub-tropical regions, produce raw material in greater volume than if labouring for wages; true, the native is more prosperous, but that prosperity is shared by everyone in the Colony. The white trader probably benefits most from the system of indigenous development; in the first place he avoids all the overhead charges of maintaining establishments with their many excessive, and oftentimes useless costs; next, he avoids those perpetual causes of friction and irritation attendant upon securing and retaining suitable—and, too often, dismissing unsuitable—white agents; in short, the white trader, under a system of indigenous production, enjoys all the advantages of limited responsibility coupled with an increasing volume of trade; again, and in turn, that volume comes as a double blessing upon the outside world, enriching the white races with cargoes of the cheap raw material of the tropics, and in the same process drawing back in return the manufactured cotton, woollen, and steel products of the factories. But the third party to this trinity of blessedness benefits equally with the native inhabitant and the immigrant merchant; the Administration finds that an expanding volume of trade spells a bounding revenue to the exchequer, whilst the contentment which follows in the wake of prosperity prevents that unrest and disturbance which usually compel large monetary grants for the maintenance of law and order. Thus, freedom for both native and white man is the key to Colonial success. Any form of slavery is not only morally indefensible, but the height of economic folly. It is the first duty of the Administration to eschew “forced labour” and slavery in any and every guise in which it may be presented, and with this, to encourage the indigenous producers by means of secure land tenure, education, and instruction in agricultural science, to an ever increasing volume and quality of raw material—properly led, the African tribes will attain to any height; driven into serfdom, the race will either win freedom, or perish.

JOHN H. HARRIS.

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